

The Use of the Braille Slate and Stylus

A Position Statement of
the Braille Authority of North America

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What is a Braille Slate and Stylus?

A slate and stylus is a small, mechanical device used for writing braille by hand. Typically, a braille slate is a pocket-sized or desktop two-part hinged device. The top part contains rows of rectangular openings corresponding to individual braille cells which guide the stylus while the bottom part has rows of indentations arranged in cells allowing the stylus to emboss dots on paper. A stylus consists of a small handle made of wood or plastic with a sharp metal point. Writing on a braille slate is done by inserting paper between the top and bottom parts of the slate and inserting the point of the stylus through the openings in the top part, pressing the paper into the depressions below.

There is a wide variety of configurations for braille slates. They can be made of metal or plastic, with or without a board made of wood or plastic. Common styles include four- and six-line pocket-size slates, larger slates that are moved down a wooden or plastic clipboard, and specialty slates for embossing cassette labels, playing cards, and labeling tape. Styluses come in many shapes and sizes to accommodate the many sizes of hands.

Slates and styluses are widely used for writing braille by persons in developing countries. In North America, their popularity has waned somewhat in recent years due to the advent of more sophisticated braille-writing devices. However, there are many braille-writing tasks for which a braille slate is particularly well-suited. The ease of use of the slate and its portability make it ideal for making labels, jotting quick notes, making shopping lists, brailling playing cards, taking down phone numbers, and other personal uses.

Learning to Use the Slate and Stylus

There is little data on the number of students who are taught to use a slate and stylus in North American schools today. Anecdotal evidence suggests that not all blind students are being taught to use a slate and stylus and, many of those who do learn to use it to write braille in this manner are learning it at the fifth grade level and even later. Most professionals recommend teaching the slate in grades 3 or 4 but some recommend that it can be beneficial for students to be exposed to the slate even as early as pre-school. Adults who are learning braille are often taught to use the slate because of its convenience and low cost.

To write braille with a slate, each dot of each braille character is written individually to form letters and words. Skilled slate users can do this very quickly. Since the braille dots are pressed into the paper, the slate user writes the letters from right to left; when the slate is opened and the paper is turned over, the braille characters can be read from left to right.

Some people believe that learning to write with a slate and stylus is difficult. Since the braille characters must be formed from right to left, people mistakenly believe that writing on a slate is done "backward." Slate instructors, however, have developed teaching strategies that focus on the forward progression of the writing task and such strategies have demonstrated that the cognitive processes necessary for slate writing do not involve reversals of characters. The instruction to students "write first what you read first" has been found to be useful.

Others believe that modern technology has eliminated the need for the device. However, most models of the slate and stylus are quite affordable (some cost less than \$10) and don't require electricity, batteries or other special equipment. They are often used in addition to newer technology and do not represent a choice of one device over another. The slate and stylus is the blind person's equivalent of a pencil and this form of convenient

access to writing braille is as essential to blind people as writing with a pencil is to sighted people.

The National Literary Braille Competency Test includes a section requiring teachers to demonstrate their competency in writing braille with the slate and stylus. This is further evidence that knowledgeable professionals in the field have determined that using a slate and stylus is an essential skill that should be mastered by teachers of blind children and adults to enable them to competently teach this skill to their students.

BANA's Position

BANA takes the position of encouraging braille literacy in its many forms. Toward that end, BANA encourages the use of the slate and stylus in all educational environments in which braille is taught.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Dunnam, Jennifer. *The Slate Book: A Guide to the Slate and Stylus*. Baltimore, MD: National Federation of the Blind, 2000.

Mangold, Phil. *Teaching the Braille Slate and Stylus: A Manual for Mastery*. Castro Valley, CA: Exceptional Teaching Aids, 1985.

Mangold, Sally. *Teaching the Braille Slate and Stylus: Video*. Castro Valley, CA: Exceptional Teaching Aides, 1994

For more information about the Braille Authority of North America, visit www.brailleauthority.org.